His Girl Friday (1939)

Manuel Lopez ‘90

His Girl Friday, made in 1939 and released in 1940, is the most popular movie adaptation of a 1928 play written entirely by two former Chicago newspapermen and best friends, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. It is closely based on real people they knew: Walter Howey, celebrated Hearst editor, and “Big Bill” Thompson, Chicago’s last Republican mayor and an intimate ally of Al Capone. Thompson, like the mayor in the movie, was also dependent on racial politics; the black vote was decisive for his victories. The press, led by the *Chicago Tribune*, helped bring him down. (Thompson’s opposite number was New York’s Republican mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who is mentioned in passing with admiration in the movie.) Hecht also wrote much of this movie adaptation, along with his other collaborator, Charles Lederer. The main change in the 1939 version is the last-second decision of the producer, Howard Hawks, to change one of the lead characters, Hildy, to a woman. This was truly inspired, and gives the work a whole new dimension: besides a political satire, it is a delightful romantic comedy—actually, a subgenre known as a comedy of remarriage. The scheming, fast-talking editor of the paper, Walter Burns, played by Cary Grant, is trying to win back the love of his rightly distrustful ex-wife—and ace reporter!—Hildy Johnson, played by Rosalind Russell. She is about to marry a genial but dull insurance salesmen, Bruce Baldwin, played by Ralph Bellamy.

The political half of the movie centers on the story Burns seduces Hildy into covering: The mayor of Chicago wants to speed through, on the eve of election day, the execution of a feeble-minded man named Earl Williams, allegedly a red, a revolutionary, for killing a black police officer. The mayor wants this so that he can win re-election with the backing of many thousands of angry black voters. The governor, unseen but heard, proves more politically agile than the mayor; he redirects popular indignation against the mayor when it’s beneficial for himself, outdoing him on law and order rhetoric. He avoids getting his hands dirty. But does the governor’s greater caution and cleaner reputation mean that he is less corrupt than the mayor, or more?

Nor is this all there is to the political corruption. Urban life is dominated by poor, uneducated immigrants, and with them arise not only radical agitators, but ward heelers, gangsters, criminal rackets, and political machines. We see the shocking, casual prominence of cutthroat Diamond Louie, and hookers like the albino Evangeline and the compassionate Mollie Malloy. Just as in Al Capone’s Chicago, the local police (represented in the movie by the sheriff), when they are not incompetent, serve the will of their paymasters, carrying out crimes for their crooked political bosses.

What is the solution to this mess? This is not *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (also made in 1939), or any Frank Capra movie. The hard-boiled editor played by Cary Grant cannot be mistaken for an idealistic Jimmy

Stewart. Now, if one pays close attention, one notices that those high or high-blown Jimmy Stewart-type sentiments are, in a way, praised in the movie—and this is one of the more subtle and interesting questions the movie asks us to consider. To what extent are these hard-boiled journalists, at bottom, really motivated by a reformer's zeal over the crooks? The silence among the reporters after Mollie Malloy reprimands them for their inhumanity is telling. There is a parallel question raised by the romantic plot: to what extent does Cary Grant's Burns, despite his carefree and glib exterior, prove instead to be the real lover, the romantic risk taker, compared to the decent, cautious, and kind insurance salesman played by Ralph Bellamy?

But on the whole, this movie is surprisingly, even shockingly, unsparing in its harsh view of our politics. The public is portrayed as sentimental and stupid, repeatedly falling prey to the hypocrisy of the speeches of politicians and their transparently criminal schemes. One detects the movie's desire to break free of the then-prevailing Hays self-censorship code. Herman Mankiewicz, who wrote *Citizen Kane* with Orson Welles, summed up the code to Ben Hecht this way: "The hero, as well as the heroine, has to be a virgin. The villain can lay anybody he wants, have as much fun as he wants cheating and stealing, getting rich and whipping the servants. But you have to shoot him in the end." To which Hecht replied, "I'll skip the heroes and heroines, to write a movie containing only villains and bawds. I would not have to tell any lies then." Whether the end of the Hays Code has improved movies, or the country, readers will have to judge for themselves.

Why are the reporters the heroes? Not because they don't also cynically prey on the people. On the contrary, among other things, they use "sob stories" to prey on the sentimentality of their readers and sell papers. The term "sob sister" is used in the movie to refer to women journalists who would run the human interest angle, attending criminal trials and manufacturing tears for profit. Hildy is actually working as a sob sister in her interview of Earl Williams. However, she is effective precisely because she is not compassionate; the genuinely pitying woman, Mollie Malloy, is the object of laughter, no one listens to her—well, that's not quite true, and perhaps not true at all (and this is the question that is raised by the movie's more Capra-like aspects).

Another example of a newspaperman's work mentioned in passing in this movie will likely be obscure to viewers today: "stealing pictures off old ladies." In the pre-Hays Code version of this movie, the full quotation is: "Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. And for what? So a million shop girls and motormen's wives can get their jollies." This was Ben Hecht's first job: picture-chaser for a newspaper. Families of victims who were raped or murdered were not keen to have their photographs in the press. So papers would hire picture-chasers, which called for ingenuity and a good set of burglary tools. Hecht had both. Once he smoked a family out of its house in winter by sealing off the chimney, then proceeded to enter and begin his search. Another time he stole a four-foot-square oil painting of a murder victim, leading his editor to say, "I'd go a little easy if I were you."

The point is that these hard-boiled journalists were not, by and large, respectable or decent. Is that what it takes to see through the lies of politicians, to not to be taken in by them—to hold their own against crooks? To be nobody's fool? The virtues of frank, shrewd, worldly republicans? Or are journalists just another type of crook? Does it take a thief to catch a thief? And is everyone who is not a thief, a fool?

One might also wonder whether the love of truth has the same root as the love of morality. There is doubtless a close relationship between them, but are they *identical*? Think about how the world looked to Ben Hecht, who, as a teenager, dropped out of the University of Wisconsin after a few days, and took a train to Chicago with $50 on him. Wasn't he dropping out, in a way, to get an education, to learn the truth of the world? All the excitement, then, is about "spectacular crimes and municipal frauds," and the "general atmosphere" is "of license, exploitation, and swindle." What does life look like to a smart young man? For example, early on, Hecht tells us, "The Stockyards' owners imported Billy Sunday to divert their underpaid hunkies from going on strike by shouting them dizzy with God." Is it possible to see that, feel the force of that, love seeing the truth of that, and *also* be respectable at one's core?

One quotation in particular captures the harsh yet joyful spirit of the political side of this movie. This is an

old Ben Hecht, in his autobiography, describing himself as a young newspaperman and his colleagues, and it reveals a lot about himself, perhaps more than he realizes: "There was, I am sure, neither worldliness nor cunning enough among the lot of us to run a successful candy store. But we had a vantage point. We were NOT inside the routines of human greed or social pretenses. We were without politeness…. We who knew nothing spoke out of a knowledge so overwhelming that I, for one, never recovered from it. Politicians were crooks. The leaders of causes were scoundrels. Morality was a farce full of murders, rapes, and love nests. Swindlers ran the world and the Devil sang everywhere. These discoveries filled me with a great joy."

I'll close on the better half of this classic: the romantic comedy. The movie sweetly vindicates the battle of the sexes. We hope that viewers today can still appreciate that on their own. Burns and even ordinary reporters know that Hildy would not be happy if she marries her insurance salesman fiancé. Why doesn't she see it? The desire for the solid and respectable seems to get in the way of her instincts, and to block the marriage (or rather re-marriage) of true minds. But to get her (and us) to see this requires some considerable harshness at the expense of her sweet, perhaps sickly-sweet, moral, and decent fiancé (not to mention his mother!). I think this corresponds to a certain contempt for the public shown by the movie's political side. It is a grave injustice, and it would be a real tragedy, for an intelligent, lively, cutting woman to marry a decent lunkhead, even one who would never (intentionally) wrong her. Such a marriage would be wrong, one might say, by nature: she would be giving up her soul. But can she trust a love that is free (or freer) from ordinary decency? Certainly there is no question that Burns has to use highly improper schemes—grossly illegal yet very funny—to win her back. But is the core of love separable from admiration and love of what's right? And aren't women wise only to be excited by—but not to marry—"bad boys"? If one were to replace Ralph Bellamy with Jimmy Stewart and consider how a Frank Capra version might proceed, one would see the problem that lies at the heart of *His Girl Friday*.

Gallipoli (1981), Four Decades On

Xavier Symons

Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli* is a powerful exploration of youth, friendship, lost innocence, and the brutal realities of war. It is also an artful depiction of the ANZAC (an acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) spirit: a war mythology that has shaped Australia's national identity and that has enduring relevance today.

Gallipoli tells the story of two young Australian men, Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson), who sign up for the Australian Imperial Force and are sent to fight in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign (1915-1916) in what is now modern-day Turkey. Archie is a young and winsome athlete from a farmstead outside of Perth, Western Australia. His energy and impetuousness are in sharp contrast to the slow pace of rural life. Frank Dunne is a cheeky, irreverent, fiercely independent young man who lives a vagrant existence in the city. Frank encounters Archie at an athletics track meet and they forge an unlikely friendship. Archie reads about the war in the newspapers and is quick to enlist. Frank, a son of Irish migrants, is more skeptical and has an instinctive suspicion of the British, but eventually Archie convinces him to join.

Viewers then find themselves in Egypt, where the Australian Imperial Force trained. We follow Archie, Frank, and a small group of young Australian soldiers who are blissfully oblivious to the grim realities of war as they enjoy their sojourn in North Africa. Shortly, though, they are called up to fight in Gallipoli. They are sent to the notorious beachhead known as the Nek, where hundreds of Australian soldiers would eventually be killed. Director Peter Weir embarks on a loose, and slightly historically inaccurate, depiction of the disastrous Entente campaign to advance inland via the beaches on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The outcome is tragic for both of the film's young Australian protagonists (I'll avoid a full spoiler).

The film was made on a very modest budget, but is widely considered an Australian cinematic classic. Mel Gibson's acting is superb, and the film helped launch his career. The cinematography is brilliant and captures the surreal realities of the First World War; at one point, we see the soldiers swimming leisurely and frolicking on the beach at the Nek while shells rain furiously down around them. The film famously begins and ends with a sprint in the barren countryside, a symbol of dashed hopes and the immortalisation of the ANZACs. The theme of *Adagio in G Minor* by Thomaso Albinoni and Remo Giasotto adds to the foreboding mood.

As Australian film scholar Nick Prescott has observed, *Gallipoli* has more in common with Terrance Malick's *The Thin Red Line* than with Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. The emphasis in this film is on the collision of radically different worlds: an innocent world of friendship and Australian larrikinism with the raw and unforgiving realities of the First World War and a particularly futile military campaign. The film also gives deep insight into the ANZAC myth, which has its own legends and liturgy and is like a secular religion in Australia today. ANZAC is a source of unity in a nation of vastly differing cultures and worldviews. Weir's film deftly captures the paradoxes of this spirit.

Ma Nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's (1969)

Jeronimo Ayesta

The French film director Éric Rohmer (Tulle, 1920–Paris, 2010) is one of the greatest filmmakers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and is one of the most long-lived members of the French New Wave. In the 1990s, he released some of his most important feature films, to which René Prédal referred as "the twilight of the masters of the 1960s generation."[1] Rohmer began as a teacher before moving to Paris and becoming a journalist; in 1956 he began working at André Bazin's *Cahiers du Cinéma*.[2] His first feature film, *Le Signe du Lion/The Sign of Leo* (filmed in 1959; released in 1962), was not successful. It was not until ten years later that Rohmer got his first success, making small-budget films in 16mm format.[3] In his personal life, Rohmer was Catholic and ecologist. He valued the intimacy of this private life,[4] and that may be one of the reasons why, compared to other New-Wave filmmakers such as François Truffaut or Jean-Luc Godard, he is usually seen as a "more marginal director" or as "humanistic and sentimental."[5] Although his films do touch deeply on the profound dilemmas of human existence, they are optimistic and humorous, to the extent that, in his 80s, Rohmer was considered "more than ever the director of adolescence and young people of today."[6] Rohmer distributed his main films in three series: the first one is the *Contes moraux/Six Moral Tales* (1963–1972); his second, the *Comédies et proverbes/Comedies and Proverbs* (six films, 1981–1987); and his third, the *Contes des quatre saisons/Tales of the Four Seasons* (four films, 1990–1998). This article presents my philosophically-loaded interpretation of *Ma Nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), the third *Moral Tale*.

However, let me take advantage of the opportunity that *Veritas Review* gives us to broaden the frame of our filmic considerations to reflect briefly on the question that, I believe, lies at the core of this publication: why is it possible to do philosophy through film? Why is film—and the spectatorial exercise of watching a movie—a philosophical exercise? Understanding film as philosophy requires widening the horizons of our understanding of what film, philosophy, and art consumption are. First, I believe, with Robert Pippin, that film can be considered "a form of philosophical reflection, given a capacious enough understanding of philosophy, one not […] wedded to a notion of philosophy as committed to 'problems' for which definitive 'solutions' are to be provided."[7] Second, and following Stephen Mulhall, films are "philosophical exercises, philosophy in action—film as philosophising."[8] This means that analyzing a film philosophically does not imply, using Paul Ricœur's terminology, an exercise of "hermeneutic violence" against the movie. Rather, the paradigm of "film as philosophy" contends that the film itself—or the exercise of watching the film itself—is already a philosophical exercise, even if philosophical topics are not directly present in the movie. This understanding of the nature of the relationship between philosophy and film has led me to believe that textual analysis is the most respectful methodology toward the nature of the filmic image. Finally, I think the French philosopher Paul Ricœur has written one of the most insightful paragraphs on the philosophical and existential value of narratives: "[S]elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation […]."[9]

Rohmer, as a filmmaker, was particularly concerned with the representation of the tensions of human life: "Ever since the cinema attained the dignity of an art, I see only one great theme that is proposed to develop the opposition of two orders—one natural, the other human; one material, the other spiritual; one mechanical, the other free; one of the appetite, the other of heroism or grace—a classical opposition… a universe of relationships that only the cinema could embrace fully."[10] In my interpretation of *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, I focus on how Rohmer depicts the human tensions regarding erotic love. Specifically, the two poles of this tension are, on the one hand, the traditional morality concerning marriage and sex, based on Catholicism, and, on the other hand, the sexually-liberated values of the Parisian May 1968 revolution. My claim is twofold: first, that some visual and stylistic elements of the movie—in particular, the interactions between the performers in and out of the frame—aim specifically to depict this set of tensions; second, that Charles Taylor's notion of

authenticity can constitute a philosophically fruitful way of understanding the main character's main conflict.

Ma Nuit chez Maud was successful both at Cannes and with Parisian audiences.[11] It tells the story of Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant), an engineer in his thirties who, after several years spent working in Canada and Latin America, decides to return to Clermont-Ferrand to work in the Michelin factory. In the first sequence of the film, we see him commuting to a Sunday Catholic mass. There, while distracted and looking around at the attendees of the service, he crosses glances with Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault) and decides—as explained by the voice-over—that she is going to be his wife. Soon after that, he meets his friend Vidal (Antoine Vitez), a communist philosophy professor, who invites him to dinner with his friend Maud (Françoise Fabian), a divorced, intelligent, and witty woman. The night Jean-Louis spends at Maud's house gives the film its title and conveys its central moral conflict. Jean-Louis, who used to be a lapsed Catholic, is going through a moment of conversion. During his night with her, both Maud and Vidal mercilessly challenge Jean-Louis' Catholic convictions, especially in relation to Catholic morality regarding marriage and sex. Jean-Louis falls in love with Maud; although he starts seeing her often, he manages to invite Françoise for dinner and ends up sleeping in an actual spare room in her house, due to the snow. For the sake of avoiding spoilers, I will not give more details on the movie. Suffice it to say that the protagonist has a conflict between two women: one (Françoise), who represents the traditional Catholic ideal of love; and other (Maud), who represents a liberated view.

It is precisely due to this structural characteristic of the movie that I find Taylor's notion of authenticity a fruitful way to give an account of it. Jean-Louis, the protagonist, is seeking his true self—in the fashion of the French "moralist" tradition—and the choice of one woman over another implies, in the context of this movie, choosing certain convictions to guide his existence. Jean-Louis' seeking inwardness is fraught with an ambiguity linked to Rohmer's commitment to a realist film style: if his films aim to depict the reality of human life faithfully, they have to depict moral conflicts with the ambiguity they have in reality. In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor provides a conceptual tool that I consider helpful to think through this set of tensions. Specifically, in my own understanding of Taylor's notion, authenticity ultimately relates to the internalization of the external horizons of meaning such as religion or family. That is, part of what is at stake in the quest for authenticity is that we internalize, appropriate, and make ours those external horizons of meaning that stop being perceived as imposed and start constituting sources of meaning. Ultimately, the protagonist's inauthenticity lies in his conflict between the horizons of meaning he considers valuable and his own desires, between the traditional morality as the horizon of meaning and the liberated claim that we should fulfil our own desires, even if they are in opposition to the horizons of meaning.

As Taylor claims, being authentic requires "a background of intelligibility", a "horizon against which things take on significance for us"; that is, external sources that provide "horizons of significance" to one's existence. Thus, "one of the things we can't do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us."[12] The key to this notion's usefulness in giving an account of the tensions in Rohmer's film is that it contains in itself the tension between "traditional" sources to define one's identity and the restless human anxiety of being original without relying on what is external. Thus, ultimately, Jean-Louis' evolution throughout the movie relates to his internalization of the horizon of meaning of Catholicism by choosing Françoise over Maud. And the masterful way in which Rohmer depicts the difficulty of this process lies precisely in how he uses the stylistic elements that operate in film, by contrasting how Trintignant, the actor who plays Jean-Louis, relates within the filmic space with both Maud and Françoise.

Notes

1. Alistair Fox et al., 'Introduction: Contemporary French Cinema—Continuity and Change in a Global Context', in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, ed. Alistair Fox et al. (Chichester & Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 5.

2. Antoine de Baecque et al., *Éric Rohmer: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 52.

3. Michel Marie, 'The Veterans of the New Wave, Their Heirs, and Contemporary French Cinema', in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, ed. Alistair Fox et al. (Chichester & Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 167.

4. Richard John Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, 2nd ed, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 245–48.

5. Neupert, 249, 132, xvi.

6. Michel Marie, *The French New Wave: An Artistic School*, trans. Richard John Neupert (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 137.

7. Robert B. Pippin, *Filmed Thought: Cinema as Reflective Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 5, doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226672144.001.0001.

8. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, Third edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 114.

10 Éric Rohmer, *The Taste for Beauty*, ed. Jean Narboni, trans. Carol Volk, Cambridge Studies in Film (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 64.

11. Norman King, 'Eye for Irony: Eric Rohmer's *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1969)', in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 202, doi.org/10.4324/9781315006024.

12. Taylor, 37.